

Community rallies to support local mental health care at Salvation Army gala

Robyn realized how bad her home life had become and had to come to "some really hard realities about her life."

Living a life of "high-functioning anxiety or being stuck in fight-or-flight mode" is no life at all, she concluded, and she recognized she was dealing with her pain in unhealthy ways.

To sustain herself, she needed help, and turned to the Salvation Army's mental health programs.

With Vicki Nishihama, a registered psychotherapist at the Salvation Army's Aurora-based Northridge Community Church, Robin said she found someone to whom she could share "the concepts and thoughts I thought were making me crazy."

"One day Vicki said to me, 'Robyn, I can't take away your trauma, but I can help you turn down the volume,' and that stuck with me because that's all I've ever wanted," Robyn shared to a packed house on Thursday night as Northridge hosted its first Gala to raise money for their mental health programs. "I don't want to lose the knowledge or lessons I have learned from my life; I just want to turn it down. I know my life will never be straightforward, it's a constantly fluid adventure, but I just know I wanted to be the one riding my wave of life."

Helping community members in need turn down that volume was reason enough for residents, businesses, and service clubs to raise their voices on September 21.

All came together for an evening of music, art and food designed to inspire and highlight the importance of having mental health care close to home.

"Mental health is health," said Newmarket-Aurora MPP Dawn Gallagher Murphy, who shared a personal story of in-school bullying that she and her elder sister experienced when they were aged 12 and 13; an incident that, for her, is as indelible as ever.

"We had our parents - our dad, an Anglican priest, and our mom, the most loving woman you would ever meet, both of whom were proud that we stood up for our friend but, at the same time, comforted us to understand that things would be okay, prayed for us to have the mental strength to carry on. We did, but what we also did was pray for those young girls and the children who bullied us, as we did not know what they were going through, what was possibly happening in their lives and in their minds, to understand what was causing them to be so unkind and so unruly towards others. In short, we live in difficult and challenging times, I believe we always have, but I do believe the rise in mental health challenges are more prevalent than ever."

Mayor Tom Mrakas offered a similar viewpoint, stating "the need for mental health services and support is growing at such a rapid pace" in York Region, Ontario, and across the country.

"Despite the incredible job that Salvation Army is already doing, it is simply hard to keep up with the growing demand of these types of services," he said. "That is precisely what this gala is all about: the community coming together to raise funds so the Salvation Army can expand their mental health services, reach more community members and change lives."

"I am so proud to see so many of you out tonight to support this important cause. It is truly a symbol of how compassionate and caring we are as a community."

The need for care was underscored by Nishihama, one of two registered therapists working for Northridge, who helped Robyn so poignantly.

She likened what she and her colleagues do to being "emotional midwives" who help "clients pregnant with emotions give birth to their stories," some of which have been "gestating for years."

Recalling the story of one client who reached out during the COVID lockdowns, in the middle of a Zoom session, Nishihama says she realized the client was speaking from her bathroom as her voice was echoing on the tiles.

She explained, 'It's the only private place I have right now.' I would learn she was a mom; intelligent, creative, articulate. She was the sole bread-earner in her family. She had two children - one in middle school the other in high school. Both were struggling with online learning, missing their friends, missing their family, missing school, extra-curricular activities. She was fortunate. She had a very supportive partner and even though she was the sole provider she had an excellent job in middle management in a very large, very stable corporation.

Still, she was struggling, a situation that was simply exacerbated by the death of her best friend.

Financially she is probably better off than many of our clients, but still concerned about the cost of therapy. When she reached out to me when she called my private number, she didn't know I had been hired by the Salvation Army. She didn't know I had been hired to help people struggling with mental health issues during this time. I will never forget her reaction when I gave her the good news her session fees were covered. She will get the support she needed and it wasn't going to impact her family's finances. I can close my eyes and can see her head tilt back. I can see her sliding down the tiles in her bathroom. When she hit the floor, she let out a wail of grief mixed with relief. In a way I was witnessing an emotional birthing, the first contraction in the birth of her sacred story.

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